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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Thirty-second session

Summary record of the 669th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 13 January 2005, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Manalo

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Election of officers (*continued*)

1. **The Chairperson** invited the Committee to a elect a third Vice-Chairperson.

2. **Ms. Gaspard**, speaking on behalf of the Group of Western European and other States, nominated Ms. Schöpp-Schilling for the office of the third Vice-Chairperson.

3. Ms. Schöpp-Schilling was elected Vice-Chairperson by acclamation.

onsideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (*continued*)

Combined second, third, fourth and fifth periodic reports of Gabon (CEDAW/C/GAB/2-5, CEDAW/PSWG/2005/I/CRP.1/Add.2 and 3)

4. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Gabon took places at the Committee table.*

5. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon) said that before introducing her country's combined second, third, fourth and fifth periodic reports, she wished to address a number of issues raised by the Committee in its report on its eight session (A/44/38) in response to Gabon's initial periodic report (CEDAW/C/5/Add.54 and Amend.1), which had been presented to the Committee in February 1989. The Committee had noted in its report that the concept of equality in Gabon seemed to be different from the one enshrined in the Convention. The Convention defined discrimination as a distinction, exclusion or restriction, while the Constitution of Gabon defined equality as the relationship between citizens who enjoyed equal rights and were subject to the same obligations, and guaranteed equality to all citizens before the law, regardless of origin, race, gender, opinion or religion. The distinction was thus merely semantic, since the term "equality" also meant non-discrimination.

6. In its report, the Committee had expressed concern at the statement made in the conclusion of Gabon's initial report, to the effect that the situation of women in Gabon remained a comfortable one. It had also stated that the provision in the Gabonese Civil Code defining the husband as the head of the family contradicted the provisions of the Convention. The term "comfortable" was intended as a reference to the overall context in which the Government strove to improve the situation of women. Similarly, the husband's role as the head of the family applied only within the context of the common interests of the household and the children, and the wife fulfilled that role in the event that her husband was no longer able or willing to do so.

7. Responding to other concerns raised by the Committee in its report, she noted that the former Secretariat of State for the Advancement of Women and for Human Rights had made significant efforts to publicize the Convention throughout the country, including the widespread dissemination of brochures containing its provisions. The Committee had expressed concern that the Gabonese Penal Code did not provide legislation to prevent prostitution, but the definition of "procurer" contained in the Code was part of the country's efforts to prevent it and punish those in violation of the law. Furthermore, there was no direct link between prostitution and the high proportion of young mothers. The Labour Code prohibited night work for women, and women did receive technical and vocational training in the public and private sectors. In 1989, the duration of maternity leave had been 14 consecutive weeks, six weeks before and eight weeks after childbirth. Women did not receive any wages for performing community work relating to the supply of water and firewood, since such work was undertaken mainly for the benefit of the family, and the resulting products intended for personal consumption.

8. With respect to the Committee's questions regarding women's health, she noted that her Government had previously set up a commission to revise the law on family planning, that abortion was indeed illegal in Gabon, and that there were paediatric medical centres in the capital, Libreville, and throughout the country. The Committee had also stated in its report that several legal provisions relating to marriage and the family were contrary to the spirit of the Convention. The Civil Code did indeed provide that a man could prohibit his wife from working outside the home, if a judge deemed that such work might endanger the family. Moreover, in accordance with the Code, the husband was solely responsible for choosing the family home. Under the law, a woman married to a Gabonese man could not work outside the home. Several women had lost important positions in consequence of those provisions.

9. The provisions of the Civil Code relating to adultery in practice concerned women only, and cases of adultery by men were indeed regarded as "allowed by custom". Amended article 78 of the Code provided that couples could renounce monogamy during their marriage, with the result that the regime of the separation of property had become more common than joint ownership. Women with children were entitled to alimony even if divorce were granted because of the woman's fault, and the social attitudes to divorced women did not cause them any significant problem. Lastly, widows and orphans were protected by the law, even though that protection might be undermined by family circumstances.

10. Turning to the combined second, third, fourth and fifth periodic reports, she reaffirmed her Government's continued commitment to the implementation of the Convention and to the elimination of gender discrimination. The situation of Gabonese women had improved in several ways. In the legal sphere, her Government had worked with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to identify laws considered to be discriminatory, and an inter-ministerial committee chaired by the Minister of Justice had been set up to review them. Subsequently, legislation had been introduced to liberalize family-planning laws, increase protection of women and children's health, and amend the Nationality Code. Furthermore, the organic law on the Constitutional Court had been amended in order to enable individuals, and notably women, to invoke the unconstitutional nature of a law before any court.

11. In the social sphere, efforts had been undertaken to institutionalize the gender focus and the principle of equal pay for men and women of equal qualifications introduced. Steps had been taken to coordinate the work of women's associations, and a number of non-governmental organizations had been formed. A ministry and national commission on poverty had been established, and the fight against HIV/AIDS intensified, in conjunction with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international partners. In the political sphere, there was no discrimination regarding women's participation in public life, and steps had been taken to introduce quotas into municipal electoral lists and ensure minimum representation of women counsellors in ministerial departments. In the economic sphere, the Government had set up a number of projects with a view to ensuring women's financial independence, and the community banking system continued its efforts to help women overcome their financial difficulties.

12. In the education sector, mandatory education had been introduced for children from 6 to 16, as well as legislation penalizing parents who violated that provision. A committee had been set up to combat HIV/AIDS in schools, funds had been allocated for literacy programmes in rural areas, and steps had been taken to protect women and girls against sexual violence. However, much remained to be done, and the primary obstacles to further progress included the persistence of traditional sociocultural attitudes and the absence of cohesion and conviction among women themselves.

13. Steps taken to promote women's advancement included the implementation of a national survey on the needs of rural women and the introduction of a President's prize aimed at promoting women's socio-economic activities. A project designed to improve the situation of poor young mothers had also been launched. Backed by a special fund, the project provided for the construction of day nurseries, the purchase of medicines, and the provision of training. Community education projects had also been set up with a view to promoting pre-school education in rural areas, reducing the school drop-out rate, and providing better nutritional and health care in rural areas, as well as promoting education in matters relating to family life. A notable initiative in that regard was a programme to train young women from rural areas as community educators who would be responsible for addressing the needs of rural children in all aspects of their development. Lastly, a survey had been conducted in 2003 with a view to measuring the availability and use of emergency obstetric services.

14. As the combined periodic reports showed, significant progress had been achieved in advancing women's rights in her country, even though much remained to be done. Despite many practical obstacles, such as the lengthy process of legal reform, the impact of traditional values, and the lack of adequate funding, her Government remained determined to pursue its policy of making society more aware of the principles of equality and promoting women's rights, as had been demonstrated by its recent ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention.

15. **Ms. Arocha Dominguez** asked about the institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women. The information in the report submitted by Gabon and the follow-up questions raised the issue as to how that machinery tied in with other Gabonese institutions. The reporting delegation should explain the role and powers of the Council of Women, for example. The delegation had stated that the Observatory for Women's Rights and Equality was a non-governmental organization, not a State body. She wished to know how the Observatory interacted with the Ministry for the Family and whether it was independent or subordinate to it.

16. **Ms. Coker-Appiah** said that the Government did not seem to believe in the negative impact of traditional beliefs on women's status in society, although it had been clearly established in societies practising the dowry system, including her own country, Ghana, that the dowry was a tool used for women's subordination and to objectify women in marriage. In addition to legal measures, it was important to undertake awareness-raising measures in order to change traditional attitudes against women. The next report should indicate what steps were being taken to educate the general public in Gabon in order to change stereotypical attitudes towards women, thereby raising their social status.

17. **Ms. Dairiam** said that the Government's response asserting that the dowry symbolized a woman's transfer from her family home to her marital domicile demonstrated a very stereotypical view of women. The reporting State should clarify its stand in regard to the cultural practices, such as the giving and taking of the dowry and polygamy and indicate whether attempts had been made to study the ill-effects of such practices, both ideological and material, and their consequences on women. She wished to know whether an in-depth study of the negative impact of polygamy on the upbringing and development of children had been conducted, as recommended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child during its consideration of Gabon's report in 2002. That issue was closely linked with the rights of women under the Convention. If such a study had been undertaken, how had its finding been utilized?

18. **Mr. Flinterman** said that Gabon's statement and the reports had referred to article 2 of the Constitution of Gabon, which ensured all citizens equality before the law without regard to sex, race, opinion or religion. For that reason, the Government had not seen the need to include a definition on discrimination in the Constitution. He enquired whether the Constitutional Court of Gabon had provided any interpretation of article 2 and, if so, whether that interpretation conformed with the far-reaching concept of discrimination provided for in the Convention? If not, then it was important, in line with the obligations of States parties, to once again consider the question of including a provision on gender discrimination in the Constitution.

19. According to the report, international agreements, including the Convention, took precedence over national laws. The reporting delegation should explain whether international agreements also took precedence over the Constitution, who decided when international agreements took precedence over national laws, whether the judiciary was aware of Gabon's international agreements, and if lawyers in Gabon were also trained in international legal questions.

20. The responses to the list of issues and questions and the reports asserted that women could raise the plea of unconstitutionality in cases of alleged discrimination. It was also said that women rarely availed themselves of that prerogative. He wished to know what special measures the Gabonese Government was undertaking in that respect, if it was possible to bring class action lawsuits in that regard, and whether the Observatory for Women's Rights and Equality could act on behalf of women, a particularly important point in the light of the Government's recent accession to the Optional Protocol. If women rarely availed themselves of the opportunity to raise the issue of unconstitutionality before the Constitutional Court of Gabon, what measures would the Government take to make it possible for women to seek redress under the Optional Protocol?

21. **Ms. Gaspard** said that, clearly, much work still needed to be done to eliminate legal provisions that discriminated against women. It would be useful to know to what extent the civil service, parliament and judiciary — institutions which played a very important role in effecting change — were familiar with the Convention and the obligations arising therefrom. Lastly, the reporting State should indicate whether there were any plans to spread awareness of the Convention and if the Convention had been disseminated in the different languages of Gabon.

22. **Ms. Gnacadja** said that, in its responses to the list of questions, Gabon had stated that an inter-ministerial committee had been established to examine texts for discrimination. The delegation, however, had indicated that the committee had not commenced its work. She wished to know why the inter-ministerial committee had not yet started its work and whether sociocultural patterns, or lack of human resources, or funds were obstacles in that regard. Lastly, the delegation had stated that there was a prohibition against women exercising their professions outside their homes. That was certainly discriminatory and was an obstacle preventing women from exercising any kind of political activity.

23. **Ms. Šimonović** said that, given Gabon's recent ratification of the Optional Protocol, women in Gabon would have an additional tool to challenge the implementation of the Convention at the national level. She, therefore, stressed the need to clear up legal issues in that regard, since during the consideration of that country's initial report in 1989, it had been pointed out that the concept of equality in Gabon seemed to differ from that enshrined in the Convention. In its responses to the list of issues and questions, Gabon had stated that, under article 2 of the Constitution, all citizens were equal before the law without distinction as to gender. Yet equality before the law was not the same as equality in rights or gender equality. Therefore, a clarification was sought from the Gabonese Government.

24. Gabon's ratification of the Optional Protocol meant that its non-fulfilment of obligations under the Convention could be regarded as violations of women's rights and could be challenged before the Committee. Therefore, it was very important for the Government to take all measures to amend any discriminatory laws and bring them into line with the Convention. She enquired whether the Government of Gabon had such plans and how it would abolish discriminatory laws.

25. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon) said that most of the legal texts in Gabon needed to be strengthened to ensure that there were no differences between legal texts and practices. The dowry law was a case in point. Although the Government had fought against that practice, it persisted to a large extent because not a single family, including its women, regarded the dowry as a negative tradition. To promote women's advancement, Gabon had finally opted to set up various joint institutional mechanisms, including at the ministerial level. For example a National Commission for the Family and Women had been established, which facilitated multidisciplinary discussions at various international conferences.

26. At the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, 12 priorities had been set out in its final recommendations, including education of the girl child. Since that also involved health-care issues, there was a need for joint institutional mechanisms to implement such provisions. For that reason, the inter-ministerial committee had been established to enable ministries to work together. After the Beijing Conference, the Observatory for Women's Rights and Equality had been set up in collaboration with UNDP to provide women with a voice.

27. **Ms. Nzet-Biteghe** (Gabon) said the work of the Observatory, an independent non-governmental organization, included examining legal texts that ran counter to women's interests, assisting women in court cases involving their rights and in cases of domestic violence, and organizing conferences and seminars to disseminate information on the Convention and ensure that women were aware of their rights. The Government intended to study the impact of polygamy on children. The terms of reference were currently being established, and once the study was completed, its conclusions would be made available.

28. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon) said that couples had the choice of opting for monogamous or polygamous marriages. In the 1990s, the Government had attempted to change the law to allow for this choice, but it had had to step back in the face of opposition from non-governmental organizations, religious groups and women's legal practitioners groups. While the Civil Code allowed polygamy with the consent of both the man and woman, women could now approach the Constitutional Court regarding article 2 of the Constitution and challenge the constitutionality of a specific law in a given context. That was a recent development.

29. The delays in preparing the second, third, fourth and fifth reports were caused by the many changes that had taken place in Gabon. The Government, however, was taking broad-based measures to do away with discrimination and disseminate the Convention among the population. The reports would also be disseminated in Gabon. A workshop was being organized together

with UNICEF and UNDP. The inter-ministerial committee was ensuring that, in each state of Gabon, the Convention was discussed in rural and urban areas in the different languages concerned. Focal points for gender also existed in various ministerial departments, and gender-related seminars for governmental officials and the private sector were being organized. The issue of domicile was related to protection of the family. Although generally women were expected to follow men, that was not always possible, for example in matters of employment.

30. **Ms. Nzet-Biteghe** (Gabon), speaking on the issue of choice of domicile, said that one did not want to act in contravention of article 1, paragraph 14, of the Constitution, which stated the family was the natural unit of society and the husband its main provider. Since that provision aimed to protect the family, the State could not approve of a separation, although exceptions could be made depending on circumstances. But there should not be a gap between what society accepted and what its laws asserted. Women who were in disagreement with the law on domicile could take up the matter in the courts.

31. Regarding the concern expressed about raising awareness of women's rights, she said that on international days for women members of the Ministry of Justice left the capital, Libreville, to disseminate information on the Government's work in order to promote women's rights and sensitize women on the issue. The Ministry wanted to decentralize its work to target rural and urban areas. Another issue raised concerned legal texts. The Ministry had also been working with UNDP and UNFPA to undertake an analysis of the laws and submit them to the inter-ministerial committee with a view to eliminating any discriminatory provisions against women.

32. **Ms. Mboga** (Gabon) said that all international conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women, became part of national law following their ratification, and the legal remedies that they provided became available to women in Gabon.

33. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon) said that Gabon had ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention in 2004.

Articles 1 to 6

34. **Ms. Zou** Xiaoqiao welcomed the efforts being made by the Government of Gabon to assume its responsibilities under the Convention, even though, as a developing country, Gabon faced special problems and challenges. She would welcome information on the measures being taken to meet those challenges and, in particular, on the results of the study that had been launched in 1996 to identify areas of discrimination in the social and legal status of women. One major difficulty in promoting the exercise of the rights enshrined in article 3 of the Convention was women's lack of awareness of their rights and their inability to take collective action. She wished to know what steps the Government and the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women were taking to promote the advancement of women and to protect them from discrimination.

35. **Ms. Tavares da Silva** sought clarification of the reference to the gradual institutionalization of the gender approach, under the heading "Social measures", on page 3 of the combined reports of Gabon (CEDAW/C/GAB/2-5). Nor was it clear from section 1b on page 7 of Gabon's responses to the list of issues and questions (CEDAW/PSWG/2005/I/CRP.2/Add.2) whether female sterility was a cause for psychological and moral violence. The report, moreover, seemed to be based on too narrow an interpretation of discrimination, even though indirect forms of discrimination, such as equal access for women to credit, remained pervasive.

36. **Ms. Shin** regretted the absence of enough sex-disaggregated statistics in the report and enquired how statistics were compiled. She also wondered whether the work of the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women was adversely affected by a lack of resources, authority or awareness, or by resistance from some sectors.

37. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** welcomed the positive steps that had been taken to promote equality between men and women in Gabon but noted that much more remained to be done. It was not clear to her whether the provisions of international instruments ratified by Gabon took precedence over constitutional provisions. She also wondered whether the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women had set a time frame for the enactment of reforms to statutory law aimed at putting an end to discrimination and whether it was envisaged to enact new legislation to promote equal opportunities for women and to combat violence against them. It would also be useful to know whether the Constitution

provided for temporary special measures. Lastly, she enquired whether the Ministry was in contact with its counterparts in other African countries that had customary laws with a view to codifying such laws and bringing them into line with constitutional and statutory provisions.

38. **Ms. Saiga** said she was confused by some of the delegation's replies concerning the inter-ministerial committee established to review the discriminatory aspects of the various codes. It was not clear to her whether that committee or the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women was responsible for the legal reforms and what mechanisms would be employed to that end. She also enquired as to the status of the legislation that had been proposed to prevent and punish sexual violence against women and trafficking in children and why women had been excluded from protection under the provisions of the draft legislation to combat trafficking in children.

39. **Ms. Patten** expressed concern at the persistence of discriminatory provisions in national laws and asked whether lack of resources, political will or support were obstacles to the proper functioning of the inter-ministerial committee. The Government must work not only to ensure that women enjoyed the same rights as men but also to modify the customs and practices that impaired the enjoyment of women's fundamental rights and freedoms. Ignorance of the law on the part of women was a major impediment to their advancement, and she wondered what steps were being taken at the grass-roots level and in rural areas to educate women about their social rights and obligations. She also asked whether legislation was being drafted to prevent and punish domestic violence against women.

40. **Ms. Morval** said that, in addition to addressing the specific needs of women, developing countries like Gabon also had to fulfil the expectations of the international financial institutions in the form of structural adjustment programmes that often had disproportionately harsh effects on women. She wondered whether such programmes provided for monitoring mechanisms or plans of action to counterbalance those effects. She would also welcome information on the indigenous populations of Gabon, including pygmy communities, who were reported to exist in slavery-like conditions, and on the steps being taken to address their particular needs. She noted that an amendment to the Penal Code provided that anyone found guilty of trafficking in children was liable to a sentence of life in prison and asked how many traffickers had been sentenced by the courts since the amendment came into force.

41. **Ms. Maiolo** noted that polygamy was permitted under the Civil Code. While consent was needed, it was difficult to see how wives could object when faced with the possibility of abandonment. She wondered what measures were envisaged to put an end to such discrimination under the law and in practice.

42. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon), referring to the practice of polygamy, acknowledged that it might be difficult to convince the Committee's experts that women in Gabon did indeed have the right to choose and to have recourse to the judicial system. A husband was obliged to obtain the written consent of his first wife before he could take a second. Nevertheless, her Ministry was currently defining the terms of reference for a study of the family. She wished to caution, however, that de facto polygamy was rife in societies that were nominally monogamous. The inter-ministerial committee had already begun its work and had embarked on educational and awareness-raising campaigns, including literacy programmes and pilot projects to promote greater access for women to microcredit.

43. There was no policy of discrimination against indigenous populations, but education and awareness-raising programmes were hampered by the instability and constant movement of the communities in question. In collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), however, efforts were being made to promote educational programmes at the community level. Draft legislation on trafficking in children was currently before the Council of Ministers and a transit shelter would shortly be inaugurated in Libreville for children rescued from traffickers. Workers were currently being trained to provide for their care. Lastly, sex-disaggregated data were available for the sectors of health and education, including statistics on the incidence of HIV/AIDS.

44. **Ms. Mboga** (Gabon) said that, as a result of the advocacy of human rights groups, the death penalty could not be handed down for the crime of trafficking in children.

45. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon) stressed the importance of ongoing training to ensure the effective implementation of legislative provisions, but her Ministry faced a problem of a lack of resources and skilled workers.

Articles 7 to 9

46. **Ms. Coker-Appiah** said that, while much progress had been made, much still remained to be done. The low level of women's participation in political and public life was particularly disappointing. With regard to women's participation at the international level, the main obstacle remained the requirement for married women to obtain their husbands' consent. According to Gabon's response to question 18, unmarried women, however, did not require the consent of a relative to participate in international activities. It seemed to her, therefore, that women's rights were subordinate to the issue of protecting the family and that married women had fewer rights than unmarried women. It was important to protect the family, but not at the expense of one of its members. She therefore wished to know whether the Government was planning to amend article 254 of the Civil Code — which, in her view, was the reason why married women required their husband's consent — so that married women could participate at the international level without falling foul of the law.

47. As for nationality, according to the report, nationality could be transferred by men or women, but in practice there was a tendency to give greater weight to the father's nationality. In that regard, she would appreciate clarification of both the grey areas and the enforcement decrees issued to clarify them, as mentioned in Gabon's response to question 18.

48. **Ms. Popescu** said that, while some progress had been made concerning women's participation in political and public life, the situation remained contradictory. She welcomed the President's decision to impose a quota of at least four women advisers in each of the ministerial Cabinets and his request that all political parties should reserve at least one third of the posts on each list for women candidates, and wondered whether Gabon had any data demonstrating the impact of those decisions. In the same context, it would be useful if Gabon could provide data on the participation of rural women in public life — for whom, she imagined, the laws on residence and marital consent posed even greater obstacles — and on the participation of women in general in the legal sphere and the private sector. Lastly, she was curious to know how the media reflected the issue and what it was doing to help combat negative stereotypes.

49. **Ms. Belmihoub-Zerdani** said that, as an African woman herself, she knew what it meant to be a woman in African society and how difficult it was to combat stereotypes that had been reinforced by colonization. However, it simply meant that an even greater effort was required in their countries. With regard to women's participation in political and public life, the report showed that women's participation in the National Assembly had been significantly higher during the single-party years (1980-1990) than during the years of the multiparty system (1990-2001); and yet she was confident that by applying the special measures provided for in the Convention, Gabon could reverse that trend. Studies by the African Parliamentary Union had shown that a women's participation rate of at least 30 per cent was required for change to occur, hence the conclusion at its recent meeting in Algiers that the average rate in African countries of between 12 and 13 per cent was insufficient.

50. The fact that the current President of the General Assembly was Gabonese provided a unique opportunity to raise awareness throughout Africa and obtain maximum results both at the national and international level. The Beijing Platform for Action put forward specific recommendations aimed at improving the representation of African women at the United Nations. She was convinced that by introducing electoral quotas, Gabon could significantly improve women's participation, especially now that it had ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention. If the situation of women and the country in general was to improve, women needed to be involved at all levels. The upcoming elections in 2006 represented a key opportunity in that regard. She was convinced that such achievements were fully within Gabon's reach.

51. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon) said that the Civil Code did not prohibit women from living outside the country in order to exercise their professional activities, and she cited a number of examples. While the relevant texts had not yet been amended, the issue was of major concern to Gabon. However, it was important to work with women too, as their agreement was essential to texts being accepted. In response to the question concerning women advisers, a person had been appointed to ensure that the Ministry met the quota. If not, she assured the Committee that she would raise the matter personally.

52. With regard to women's participation in political and public life, she recognized that the number of women candidates was very low for all political parties, for various reasons. In that regard, a seminar had been organized on gender in politics with all the main parties. In November, Gabon had also hosted the sixth conference of the Network of Gabonese Women Ministers and Parliamentarians, which aimed to increase women's representation. A survey had been conducted on the number of women in decision-making positions in the public and private sector, the results of which would be made available to the Committee, as well as statistics on women's participation in the legal sphere. She admitted that, while a few key posts were held by women, the critical mass of 30 per cent had not been met. In response to the question on the media, she said that concerns had been raised in Gabon about the image of women in the media. In addition, programme schedules were now being introduced to target female audiences and enable women to express their concerns.

53. **Ms. Mboga** (Gabon) said that the Act introducing the new Nationality Code had now been adopted. The main innovation was that both men and women could now transfer nationality not only to their children, but also to their spouse. There were, however, problems in practice. In particular, there was a backlog of cases owing to the fact that, though the Act had been introduced in 1998, no action had been taken until it had come into force in 2002.

54. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon), responding to the question concerning rural women, said that the results of a recent survey were still being processed and would be made available in time for the next report.

55. **Ms. Nzet-Biteghe** (Gabon), responding to the question concerning violence against women, said that the Penal Code already provided penalties for all forms of violence, including rape and domestic violence, as well as for immoral behaviour and offences against public decency. Gabonese men were also strictly prohibited from hitting their wives. It was the responsibility of non-governmental organizations to monitor implementation and legislation initiated by Government and Parliament and to raise issues of concern. They had many channels for doing so, such as the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women and a number of specific parliamentary committees. As for awareness-raising activities, brochures providing easy-to-read information on the rights of women under the law had been distributed in the interior of the country and in rural areas.

56. **Ms. Mboga** (Gabon) said that, while the Penal Code did indeed already cover violence against women, the Government was working on a bill on sexual violence — one of the most serious forms of violence against women and children — which was now being revised and improved by the relevant technical departments.

57. **Ms. Ngoma** (Gabon) said that the issue of sexual violence was highly sensitive and many people were reluctant to come forward or express their views. The Government was addressing the situation, but it was important to remember the specific cultural issues facing each country and that it was a gradual process. On the other hand, people tended to have stronger feelings when members of their own family had been affected. Lastly, she mentioned the new phenomenon of violence by women against their husbands, which also needed to be addressed.

Articles 10 to 14

58. **Ms. Tan**, referring to the particular problems faced by rural women, said that it would be interesting to learn what efforts had been made to inform rural women about the provisions of the Convention, especially since the ratification of its Optional Protocol. According to the report (page 23), the village water-supply programme had enabled 40 per cent of the drinking-water needs of the rural population to be met, in three provinces. She wondered whether there was a specific time frame for extending the programme to the remaining six provinces and what temporary measures would be taken in the interim period. The same questions applied to the significant measures that the State was planning to take on behalf of rural women (page 24).

59. **Ms. Arocha Dominguez**, referring to the advancement of women in employment, said that Gabon had not responded to the Committee's request for information on the situation of women in both formal and informal employment, including programmes to encourage them to gain access to the labour market (question 25). The *2004 Human Development Report* also contained no female employment indicators for Gabon. The Committee wished to know, in particular, whether the Ministry for

the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women planned to conduct a study on the situation of women in formal and informal employment and the protection of their labour rights. She hoped that the information would be available in time for the next report.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.